

While each of these symbols focuses on the particular theme of each gospel, only in penetrating all four Gospels do we encounter fully our Lord.

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**Pamphlet 123**

## **The Symbolism of the Gospel Writers**

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**The Gospel writers have symbols — a man, a lion, a bull and an eagle — which I think refer to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Why these symbols?**

Traditionally, the four Gospel writers have been represented by the following symbols (as indicated in the question): St. Matthew, a divine man; St. Mark, a winged lion; St. Luke, a winged ox; and St. John, a rising eagle. These symbols are taken first from the Prophet Ezekiel (1:1-21): “In the 30th year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens opened, and I saw divine visions. ... As I looked, a stormwind came from the North, a huge cloud with flashing fire, from the midst of which something gleamed like electrum. Within it were figures resembling four living creatures that looked like this: their form was human, but each had four faces and four wings, and their legs went straight down; the soles of their feet were round. They sparkled with a gleam like burnished bronze. Their faces were like this: each of the four had a face of a man, but on the right side was the face of a lion, and on the left side the face of an ox, and finally each had the face of an eagle... .”

In the Book of Revelation (4:6-8), we find a similar description: “Surrounding this throne were 24 other thrones upon which were

seated 24 elders; they were clothed in white garments and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightening and peals of thunder; before it burned seven flaming torches, the seven spirits of God. The floor around the throne was like a sea of glass that was crystal-clear. At the very center, around the throne itself, stood four living creatures covered with eyes front and back. The first creature resembled a lion; the second, an ox; the third had the face of a man; while the fourth looked like an eagle in flight. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and eyes all over, inside and out. Day and night, without pause, they sing: ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, He who was, and who is, and who is to come!’”

These images in both the Old Testament and the New Testament prompted St. Irenaeus (140-202) to liken them to the four Gospel writers because of the content of their Gospels and their particular focus on Christ. In his treatise “Adversus Haereses” (“Against Heresies,” XI) , St. Irenaeus posited, “‘The first living creature was like a lion’ symbolizing His effectual working, His leadership, and royal power; ‘the second was like a calf,’ signifying His sacrificial and sacerdotal order; but ‘the third had, as it were, the face as of a man,’ — an evident description of His advent as a human being; ‘the fourth was like a flying eagle,’ pointing out the gift of the Spirit hovering with His wings over the Church. And therefore, the Gospels are in accord with these things, among which Christ Jesus is seated.”

Being more specific, St. Irenaeus explained the symbolism as follows: St. Matthew is represented by a divine man because the Gospel highlights Jesus’ entry into this world, first by presenting His family lineage — “A family record of Jesus Christ, Son of David, son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1) – and His incarnation and birth — “Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.” (Mt 1:18). “This then,” according to St. Irenaeus, “is the Gospel of His humanity; for which reason it is, too, that the character of a humble and meek man is kept up through the whole Gospel.”

St. Mark, represented by the winged lion, references the Prophet Isaiah when he begins his gospel: “Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In Isaiah the prophet it is written: ‘I send my messenger before you to prepare your way: a herald’s voice in the desert, crying, “Make ready the way of the Lord, clear Him a straight path.”’” “The voice in the desert crying” reminds one of a lion’s roar, and the prophetic spirit descending to earth reminds one of a “winged message.” The lion also signified royalty, an appropriate symbol for the Son of God.

The winged ox represents St. Luke. Oxen were used in temple sacrifices. For instance, when the Ark of the Covenant is brought to Jerusalem, an ox and a fatling were sacrificed every six steps (2 Sm 6). St. Luke begins his gospel with the announcement of the birth of St. John the Baptizer to his father, the priest Zechariah, who was offering sacrifice in the Temple (Lk 1). St.

Luke also includes the parable of the Prodigal Son, in which the fatted calf is slaughtered, not only to celebrate the younger son’s return, but also to foreshadow the joy we must have in receiving reconciliation through our most merciful Savior who as Priest offered Himself in sacrifice to forgive our sins. Therefore, the winged ox reminds us of the priestly character of our Lord and His sacrifice for our redemption.

Lastly, St. John is represented by the rising eagle. The Gospel begins with the “lofty” prologue and “rises” to pierce most deeply the mysteries of God, the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the incarnation: “In the beginning was the Word, the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God. He was present to God in the beginning. Through Him all things came into being, and apart from Him nothing came to be” (Jn 1:1-3) and “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us, and we have seen His glory: The glory of an only Son coming from the Father filled with enduring love” (Jn 1:14). The Gospel of St. John, unlike the other Gospels, engages the reader with the most profound teachings of our Lord, such as the long discourses Jesus has with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, and the beautiful teachings on the Bread of Life and the Good Shepherd. Jesus, too, identified Himself as “the way, the truth, and the life,” and anyone who embraces Him as such will rise to everlasting life with Him.

